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DISCUSSION

SUCCESS IN SCHOOL¹

Not to prejudice ourselves at the outset in the consideration of the report,² but rather to help us judge of the different articles as they come up, we suggest these two criteria:

1. Many statements which easily may apply to schools with diversified manual courses, like the Washington Irving High School, or to diversified schools or to technical schools, would not work at all in a school whose course is for general culture.

2. It is quite an easy matter destructively to attack a system, but entirely another matter to substitute something better for it.

I. WHAT WE ARE FOR

The principal contentions of this section are:

1. The high school is not solely to train leaders; it is for all up to the age of eighteen.

2. A public high school differs from an elementary school chiefly in the age of its pupils.

3. Everyone, rich or poor, is entitled to our services.

4. We are responsible for the success of the student; I am responsible for each and every failure in my classes.

1. The report sets forth the position of extremists. We contend that pupils who are reasonably fit and willing ought to be permitted to attend public high schools, and that others ought to be excluded. This proposition does not mean that we are not to help the pupils. Nor does it imply that we are here solely "to train leaders." On the contrary, we affirm that it is the high-school teacher's business to give to his pupils all reasonable assistance and encouragement.

2. We reject the idea that "a public high school differs from an elementary school chiefly in the age of its pupils." Other important differences are: the character of the studies; the specialization of the teachers' work; the more definite aims and ambitions of the pupils; the ability, intelligence, and physical strength of the pupils; and the amount of work which ought to be required of them.

3. We know of no proposal to make any distinction in admission to or attendance upon public high schools on the score of wealth or poverty. We think, however, that if the report means what it says, that everyone is entitled to attend high school (regardless of preparation and ability), the proposition is easily reduced to an absurdity.

¹ This discussion was read before the faculty of the Boys' High School, Brooklyn.

² By Principal William McAndrew and a committee of teachers in the Washington Irving High School for Girls (*The School Review*, XIX, 585-95, November, 1911).

Ought a boy who has gone but partly through grammar school to be permitted to attend a high school? Some standard of admission is demanded for the first year of high-school work. If, then, such a test is demanded for the first year, by what reason is it denied for the second, third, and fourth years? Or how long ought a pupil to be permitted to repeat any one year of work, retarding the progress of his classmates and misusing the city's money?

The report affirms that "a child poor in brains, in effort, in appreciation, in gratitude, in respect, belongs here." We roundly deny that. We claim that such a boy might better get his education out in the world by going to work; it is better for himself, for his parents, for the other pupils, for his teachers, for the city's treasury, for the commonwealth.

No matter what sort of a course might be established, mechanical, industrial, or commercial, we are not prepared to admit the assertion of the report that it is advantageous for all children to stay in school until eighteen years of age. If it were, the course of study suitable for one pupil would prove unfit for another; the teacher practically would have to make the course for each pupil, getting what he could out of each one, and the minimum attained by all would be an absurdity. What effect would such an arrangement have upon pupils who are fit and willing?

If a child is "lazy, unprepared, or unfit to go on," we ought to try to make him industrious and fit. But we are not miracle-workers. After all, our means of changing his nature, habits, and environment are comparatively small.

4. The dogma of the report that we are responsible for the success of our pupils is only partly true. There are three factors here, assuming that the school facilities are perfect, namely: pupil, teacher, parent. And while we grant that the teacher must do much to inspire both pupil and parent, yet to say that upon him alone lies the whole responsibility is overdoing the matter.

We contend that no amount of "encouragement, inspiration, suggestion, belief, exhortation, compliment, recognition, and praise" will cure some loafers and incapables. To the statement, "Failures must be minimized, successes increased," add, "The unfit and unworthy must be weeded out." This might be accomplished partly by attacking the evil at its root, that is, by an examination for admission to high schools, or by some other selective process. Where such a bar is lacking, a considerable degree of high-school mortality (aside from that caused by financial circumstances) is not only not an evil; it is perfectly normal and indeed inevitable.

II. PARALYZED BY A MARKING SYSTEM

[Does not call for discussion]

III. THE HIGH-SCHOOL MATERIAL

To certain propositions in this section we agree:

1. Many find transition from the elementary school to the high school bewildering.
2. The business of the teacher is to make the pupil feel at home and find himself.

3. The teacher should try to encourage expectation of success.
4. The beginning of our term is the critical time.
5. Many do not wake up at all during the first year.
6. Some are merely sent to school; they do not come of their own accord.
7. A great need is that the high-school teacher be "engaging."
8. There should be [a certain amount of] flexibility in the high-school course [to be accomplished, we believe, mainly by well-chosen elective studies and by diverse high-school courses].

We differ, at least in part, with the following:

1. The mill-process is a failure with high-school children.

This statement is too broad. It needs definition. If it means that the pupil should be given a chance to "realize himself" in some special branch of technical work, we agree that he should not be ground out of the system. But, as we have said above, there are some pupils entirely unfitted for our general high-school course. It would be better for them to be "ground out" and sent to work or to a specialized course.

2. Adapting the high-school course to the capacity of all the students does not mean abandonment of work. It means more skilful direction of work.

If by this is meant "skilful steerage" of pupils into courses which fit their desires and abilities, we agree. But if it applies to the general high-school course, again we say that we are not miracle-workers.

IV. ADAPTING OURSELVES

The principal argument here is:

"The course of study can be covered by every child who gets into the high school. Everyone has the mental power for it. The course of study is there. The pupil is there. If the teacher cannot make them fit the teacher is a misfit."

The above takes for granted that every pupil who has reached high school is able to complete the course. Carried out logically, it means that every person can attain just what he wishes. We all know that there are boys in our first-year classes who would require years to get into the second, boys in the second year who would require years to get into the third, and so on. Death by old age alone would relieve the school of some of these if they insisted upon remaining to graduate.

We grant that the teacher should do all in his power for the pupil, but we believe also that the pupil should do a little of the adapting. When he gets into business he will find that the habit of adapting himself to hard work, no matter how unpleasant it may be, will stand him in good stead. There is at least a modicum of truth in Herbert Spencer's contention that education is a "preparation for complete living."

V. TAKING MONEY FIXES RESPONSIBILITY

The principal propositions of this section are:

1. High-school education is the right of all children, because parents pay taxes.

2. We alone (the teachers) are responsible because we alone accept money for our services.

3. Salary and tenure of office should depend upon the ability of the teacher to "attract, retain, and educate children."

1. Some of the statements, though aimed at the truth, overshoot the mark. We deny that high-school education is the right of all children because parents are paying for it. This assumes the "benefit" theory of taxation, a false theory which has long been supplanted by the "ability" theory. Parents are not taxed as parents, even though their children get the benefit, and parents bear but a small part of the expense of education. Those support education who have the property, and therefore the ability to pay.

Again, schools are not maintained for the benefit of the individual pupil: at least not alone for him. Their function is to provide intelligent, efficient, moral citizenship. It is a misuse of public funds to retain in a school any pupil who shows neither capacity nor disposition to profit by its facilities, because his presence is an obstacle to the progress of those whose ability and energy make the investment in schools profitable.

2. We are told that "the ultimate responsibility for success rests upon us, not upon children or parents, because no money whatever is paid to them." "A physician cannot berate his patients because they are sick." Certainly not; the parents may transmit an enfeebled nervous system, and the patient violate every law of sanitation, but only the physician is responsible, "because he alone receives pay." No physician in good standing would accept the "no cure no pay" plan, yet the report proposes this plan for teachers. The method would be even more unjust to us than to the physician. The physician is free to choose his course of treatment, while in our case both the medicine and the size of the dose are fixed for us, and we are to be judged by our ability to make the dose fit the patient and the patient the dose.

3. The report would even go so far as to have salaries and tenure depend upon the ability of the teachers to "attract, retain, and educate" children.

In our evening schools at present, tenure depends upon ability to attract and retain, and we are afraid that effort in this direction sometimes overshadows effort to educate.

It would be an ideal condition if teachers could be judged and paid according to their ability to educate. But it is utterly impossible for human wisdom accurately to judge such ability even at close range; and the recent effort in New York to classify teachers upon this basis has shown only too well the difficulties of judging thus in a large system like ours.

Furthermore, the teacher's responsibility does not end when he or the inspector thinks that he has earned his salary; not until he has awakened the right desires for effort and morality in his pupils. And can a regents' examination always test this?

In conclusion, we agree with the spirit and purpose of the report. The teacher should make greater use of encouragement and inspiration, less of

testing and measurement. But much that is said with truth concerning the Washington Irving High School, with its diverse and loosely defined courses, is entirely inapplicable to our school, with its intense and closely defined course, with standards fixed by state and city authorities.

Also, since the authors of the report have ruled us out of court, they should give us more than glittering generalities—something definite to substitute for our “un-American” method, so that not only may we “in humility and contrition” “acknowledge repentance” for the past, but in the future more than “scratch the shell of the problem” and yet have reason “to blow a trumpet.”

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FINIS CONTROVERSIAE

The main points of difference between Professor Bagley and myself are clearly formulated in our two communications, and to cavil further on turns of expression would give to this friendly discussion a tone of personal polemic which I am sure he would deprecate as much as I do. I will merely call attention, in conclusion, to two little points: (1) If disparagement of “my profession” (p. 489) were the same as disparagement of me, we classicists would indeed be in a desperate case. I have said some hard things about Professor Bagley’s profession, for which I am sincerely impenitent. But I did not attribute to him the exaggerated susceptibilities of Captain MacMorris—“Of my nation? What ish my nation? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation ish a villain and a bastard and a knave and a rascal.” (2) In saying (p. 488) that “it is not a matter of minor consequence that Professor Shorey should dismiss as too ‘simple to be recognized’ the terms ‘concept of method’ and ‘ideal of procedure,’” Professor Bagley illustrates a radical difference between—let us say, the philologist and the educator, in ideals of procedure in respect to the use of quotation marks. Neither the quoted words nor their meaning occur in my paper. I said, on p. 420, that I could not recognize those simple phrases as specific improvements which we owe to experimentation.

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